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ABSTRACT

Rising energy costs, changing tax bases, increasing numbers of non-traditional students, and ever changing educational technology point to the fact that community college administrators will have to accept uncertainty as a normal planning component. Rather than ignoring uncertainty, a tendency that was evidenced in the reluctance of administrators to prepare contingency plans for California's Proposition 9 in 1980, college managers must follow planning modes that allow them to pursue any of several paths based on decisions made at the very last moment. Such a planning mode has been implemented at Long Beach City College (California). This mode entails an ongoing cycle of seven steps: (1) define the planning units (departments, administrative offices, etc.); (2) prepare a one-paragraph statement explaining why the unit exists; (3) develop five or six statements outlining the outcomes desired of the unit; (4) list each of the courses offered by instructional units under one of the identified outcomes and require non-instructional units to list and assign priorities to the tasks necessary to accomplish each desired outcome; (5) prepare plans for the evaluation of the extent to which each unit achieves the outcomes; (6) collect data for the evaluation; and (7) reorganize resources within units based on evaluation findings. Unit functions can be redefined at any point in the planning process. (JP)

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Methods of Dealing with Uncertainty

Panel Presentation

Frank C. Pearce

Association of
California Community College Administrators

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Methods of Dealing with Uncertainty

Panel Presentation

Frank C. Pearce

This morning we want to talk with you about the most perplexing problem that community college managers face today and probably tomorrow. Many of us know about the problem, but few of us have chosen to face it. The problem, like most, can be approached in at least two ways, we can look it straight in the eye, define it and develop a plan for dealing with it and get to work--or--we can ignore it hoping it will go away or resolve itself. As a relatively small example of what I mean, consider the way many colleges have decided to deal with the possibility that Proposition 9 will pass.

In a recent survey of participants at a statewide conference in The Los Rios Community College District, it was found that the vast majority of the trustees and administrators in attendance neither had nor knew of any plans in their district to respond to the budget cuts that would be needed if Prop 9 would pass. In fact, during an earlier meeting of Community College Presidents with Chancellor Jerry Hayward many of the presidents stated they weren't planning to do anything until they knew the outcome of the vote. On the surface, their rationale made sense--they didn't want to turn their college upside down by introducing trauma and anxiety unless it were absolutely necessary. Well, that's one way to deal with a problem and it's a very common approach used by managers in every kind of endeavor including business and industry.

The alternative, as I said earlier, is to face it--organize you resources accordingly--and constantly evaluate how well you are doing in getting the problem resolved. In effect, even if the problem looks as big as a mountain you get out your pick and begin to chisel away at it.

The problem we will be discussing with you is called many things. One book I recently read called it "ambiguity." Others describe it as "uncertainty". I would like to call it by an old and familiar label--"change". How do you effect change at your college, clearly it's one of the most difficult tasks any of us face. Moreover, during these times, to channel change into constructive results is particularly difficult. Whatever you call it--I would suggest it is the most difficulty problem we face as managers.

Recently, I was interviewed by a graduate student from one of our local universities who wanted to know what was the biggest problem I faced at Long Beach City College. To her surprise I didn't say it was financing, Proposition 9, nor was it collective bargaining, and it certainly wasn't improvement of instruction nor for that matter sit-ins by Cambodian students. It was instead of all these things, how to lead my college in responding positively to the external and internal forces that literally pound at us. Simply put, how do you deal with the continuous change that bombards our

colleges while recognizing such change will occur at a more rapid pace with each passing day.

It is not difficulty for us to recognize the need for some systematic way to deal with the multitude of uncertainties we face. The difficulty is knowing how to plan when you know the objective is constantly changing, or as some wise sage put it, its hard to remember that your objective was to drain the swamp when you're up to your ass in alligators. How do you develop a method for dealing with ambiguity. Well, we don't have any simple answers for you, but we have some ideas to share. We have to deal with it no matter how difficult, and find ways to plan for the future without having a very clear picture of what that future will be. Essentially, we have to recognize that uncertainty is her to stay and it may well become a way of life.

For a graphic example of the problem of ambiguity, uncertainty or change, we've asked Herb Sussman to share an experience with us on how to resolve a problem that changed just as soon as he got it resolved. In face, his experience may be one we will all face if Proposition 9 passes or perhaps even if it doesn't/

I would like to turn now to the future--what can we expect to have to deal with in the decade ahead? Remember, my purpose in sharing my vision with you is to emphasize the need for each of us to recognize that things will continue to change and they will do so at an ever increasing rate. Looking ahead is not just a matter of curiosity, it is something we must do if we expect to be able to deal with reality. Our reality will be ambiguity, uncertainty, and change, but we need to be able to take appropriate action, nonetheless.

Please understand, in this business of predicting the future, my crystal ball suggests things that may <u>be</u> not things that <u>will</u> be. At the same time, I don't see how some of these changes can be avoided or perhaps, equally disturbing, is that some of them will occur despite our best efforts. At any rate, I present these possibilities to you as food for thought.

Some of the more obvious changes we can expect lie in the area of natural resources. For example, approximately every ten years California encounters a drought and I am sure you remember the last one. It was only a few years ago and it was not too pleasant. The next one should occur around 1985 or 86. This time we will not have access to water from the Colorado River and the proposed peripheral canal may not even be started let alone finished. In southern California they are predicting brown lawns and rationing water so that each person receives approximately 27 gallons per day. If you want some feeling for what that might be like talk to the people in Marin County, or for that matter, right here in Monterey.

Somewhat nearer at hand is the cost of electricity. You can expect a 30% jump by July 1, 1980 and additional rate increases shortly thereafter. The same alarming increases can be expected in the cost of natural gas. At LBCC we expect our utility cost

to rise by $500,000 next year alone. We are starting to look at the possibility of a four-day work week for some or all of our campus'. Another certainty is increases in fossil fuels, who knows what the price of gasoline will be, but I tend to believe the Lundgren report which says $1.86 per gallon by the end of the year would be a common experience for most of us. As a commuter institution, such alarming increases will have some very interesting effects upon our student population.

If you really want to contemplate the magnitude of ambiguity and uncertainty, let me suggest you consider the report of some leading astronomers who claim that in 1981 the planets in this solar system will be aligned one behind the other. Imagine Earth and all the other planets in a straight direct line. More importantly, imagine the tremendous gravitational pull that will result. One might even speculate on whether such tremendous forces could cause the San Andreas fault to crack wide open, and who knows, those who have been predicting the separation of California from the rest of the United States may have a reality on their hands. In any event, for those who like to plan ahead, the target date is October 17, 1981.

Perhaps less spectaculra, but equally important, is the concern of political scientists that the 1980's may see the end of our two party system. Based upon declining voter turnouts, party decomposition and realignment, declines in party loyalty and the increase in special interest and single issue groups, we can expect the political climate of our country to demonstrate even more confusion in the next decade. That's hard to believe given the confusion we see today, but I would suggest you look at only one factor and decide for yourself and that is the number of single-issue candidates being elected to congress. These individuals often have simple answers for complex problems. The fallout for us is no sense of direction and inability to predict results. In a word, such political instability that ambiguity becomes a way of life.

Let's turn for a moment to more pleasant topics we may expect to hear about in the next 10 years. For example, holography should become a reality in the classroom. You may not know the name, but I am sure you have all experienced this new technology while visiting the Haunted House at Disneyland. Remember the ghostly, three dimensional images you saw that seemed to be floating in space? This is a phenomenon created by a laser beam which projects images into space. Imagine what you could do as a teacher of history if you could transport Ancient Rome into your classroom so that standing among your students are the Roman senators deciding the fate of Julius Caesar. This would not be an illusion of watching, but one of actually being there in person.

At the current moment, we have the technology that would allow us to hold video conferences with our students in their homes or, for that matter, to hold interactive video hearings between constituents and congressional leaders. These activities are currently going on and it only seems reasonable that they will

soon become part of our activities in the teaching field. Another apparent development lies in the computer field where miniaturization is reducing cost tremendously. Certainly it won't be long before you will have your very own computer and so will everyone else in your neighborhood.

Equally impressive are some of the probable happenings in the biological fields. For example, cloning--the taking of a cell from a living plant or animal and chemically inducing it to multiply until the duplicate of the parent is reproduced. It may not be as much fun as sex, but it does work. We have already produced healthy carrots, asparagus and frogs, who knows what will be next.

It is also interesting to speculate about the ability to regenerate tissue. For example, nature has given to certain types of lizards the ability to regenerate, or regrow their tail in the event of its loss. We can already regenerate spinal tissue, perhaps the regeneration of fingers and toes will become possible during our lifetime.

In a somewhat similar vein, we soon will see a device for blind persons that replaces the cane. This device emits ultrasonic waves and one can tell from the intensity with which the device vibrates how close you are to curbs, buildings, and other objects. It doesn't take too much imagination to suggest that this same principle could be applied to books, or to stationary objects emitting their own sound.

A little more esoteric is some of the research being conducted with chemicals produced by the brain. Functions as concentration, aggression, and memory have been identified as chemical events and the chemicals produced by the brain to influence such functions have been isolated by scientists. If their research holds up the implications for treating mental disorders or, perhaps more important, to enhance one's creative ability are immense. The phrase "mind expanding" may take on a new meaning during this coming decade.

Turning somewhat closer to home, it is apparent that our college student populations will continue to become increasingly part time, the number of ethnic minorities enrolled at our colleges will certainly increase, and we shall see some form of tuition. In fact, I wouldn't even be surprised if we see some regionalized control of community colleges. Although it's sad to contemplate we may also find ourselves faced with the spector of a California Community College that had to close its doors.

The Carnegie Foundations suggest that we may see a new student movement. They do not predict its theme nor direction, but they do suggest that it will be much different than anything we have seen before. Personally, after having survived the late 60's and early 70's I would be pleased to see a movement different from that, and hopefully one that's somewhat less violent.

Clearly we can expect further shifts in student enrollment towards the vocational and immediate employment related classes. In fact these kinds of classes will probably make up the largest segment of our community college student. Those students will be, on the whole, persons who are currently employed who wish to upgrade their training, or perhaps, persons who are currently employed but are looking for a new occupation. In fact it now appears that our culture will fully embrace and accept the mid-life changes that are occuring more commonly these days. This in turn will add further impetus to the number of persons who decide to change occupations and who will expect to be helped by the community colleges to achieve these changes. At the same time this should not be alarming to us since the alterating of curriculum and instruction to meet the changing needs of our communities will still be a major function. It's simply going to be harder to do than in the past because we are going to have to make such changes faster.

I hope these examples do provide you with some food for thought. My primary point, however, has been not be emphasize the nature of these changes and how they will affect our colleges, but rather to suggest that they are simply examples of the changes that we may expect to face in the years ahead. I would simply urge each of you to recognize that such a change is normal and that we can adapt to an uncertain future. We are living proof of the human organism's ability to adapt to change and to modify our behavior as may be demanded by the environment that surrounds us. The only question is whether or not it will happen to us or we shall plan to accommodate such change. Personally, I believe we can plan for ambiguity.

You may recall when we introduced this session my talking about people choosing not to face problems. As I noted they felt the anxiety and trauma that would be experienced by everyone throughout the college in preparing contingency plans for Proposition 9 simply wasn't worth it unless the proposition actually passed. That's not to suggest they aren't giving the matter considerable thought, rather, that they don't intend to prepare a comprehensive plan.

I don't pretend to judge that decision, but I would argue against the rationale being used. Namely, that it may cause unnecessary anxiety. Personally, I believe we have to learn how to live with unnecessary anxiety. We have to learn how to lead our colleges in an environment where uncertainty and the anxiety it produces are normal. In fact, if you thing about it for a moment we have always faced uncertainty--the difference the future hold for us--is a matter of degree or intensity. For example, I'm sure you remember "The Cap". Remember what a disaster that was -- our budget growth was limited to 5%. Then the next year we passed Senate Bill 6 which provided a long range solution -- for two years. Then there was revenue limitation under Senate Bill 1641 followed quickly by the Block Grant with which none of us could possibly live and then another long range solution we now refer to as AB 8, it will be changed this year after only one year. Who knows what this spring will bring or how we will be financed next year. We can be absolutely certain about one thing, however, we know it will be different than what we have today, and we won't know

what that is until the very last second. Personally, I believe this decade will continue to present us with considerable financial instability. In fact, based on the rate of change we have experienced of late, the speed with which the financial cycles and other changes occur, (remember the cap was only five years ago), we shouldn't be surprised if our financial situation begins to change in the middle of the year rather than each year or two.

My point in all this speculation about the past and the future is to suggest that rapid change, such uncertainty, will be the normal situation. Our challenge is to accept it as normal and follow a planning mode that allows us to pursue many paths depending on finding answers at the very last moment. We need to know what the range of alternatives are, the advantages and disadvantages of each and then be ready to act upon the one that seems most appropriate for the situation we face. In a sense this is the business of thinking and contingency planning that we've all heard about, but most of us have not engaged in a very serious manner. I am suggesting that we develop a plan and not simply "let's see what happens and react accordingly".

Long Beach has not developed simple nor magical answers for dealing with rapid change. In fact, the literature is full of rather interesting approaches that one might consider if that's your bag. Instead we've taken a rather basic approach and tied on a few rings, jingles, and bells to make ti work. The toal system is not in place at this time and I'm not sure that it will ever be, or for that matter whether it even should be. Our objective, however, is to develop a system that is highly flexible to deal with tomorrow's uncertainty, yet, the core of the system is basic and unchanging. The external features of this model, however, like the condition we are planning to meet, are themselves in an almost continuing state of uncertainty. It's a model that sounds strange and yet at the same time I thing you will see is, a fairly straight-forward approach to uncertainty planning.

I would also caution you that the system we are using isn't too hard to describe, but it is terribly difficult to implement. In fact, I would suggest the process you follow in implementing this system or whichever system you use, will probably be more important than the options it produces for you to contingency planning. You really need to take the time to plan how you will introduce the process, how it will be implemented, how much you will try to accomplish, who will be involved in what phases, and perhaps, most important, how to deal with the paranoia it will cause. It effect, the planning process itself will create considerable uncertainty. You should expect that not matter how clearly you communicate the necessity for uncertainly planning people will decide it is for some other reason and that reason has a very negative impact on them personally. People also want to protect their "turf" and will perceive this process as one which will expose their position, their weak points. This is true, of course, it will also have just the opposite effect. It will expose their strengths and, more importantly, suggest ways that they can make themselves even stronger. I'll comment more on this critical aspect of human behavior and implementation of the

process as we go through this presentation, but let's turn now for a moment to the process itself.

Remember the intent of this entire activity is to identify options and alternatives that can be implemented in accordance with the type and magnitude of the uncertainty being faced. A plan if you will that allows you to act rather than just react to rapid change.

The first step is to decide what your planning units will be. When I came to Long Beach seven years ago, we chose positions as the planning units. As we began to get the value of such planning accepted by the management staff, they found, for example, that it was quite helpful to them in doing their jobs. We then moved into the Academic programs and Activity Centers (like my office, counseling, fiscal affairs, purchasing, etc.). From now on we will change the planning units as the planning process itself dictates is necessary. In effect, you will find that if you make a mistake in deciding what planning units are appropriate, the planning process will help you decide a change is needed and you can try again. Why? Because all components of this process are ever-changing to meet the ever-changing conditions to which it must respond.

The second step is an excellent example of something that is quite simple to describe, but damn difficult to do. Each planning unit, whether it be positions, programs, offices, or whatever, should prepare a statement in no more than one paragraph, and preferably in three lines or less, that tells why they exist. What is their reasons for being? What is the central feature of their office or program? What would be lost to your college if that particular planning unit no longer existed? Unfortunately, the negative approach is sometimes the better one for getting people's attention in this matter. I would suggest that you stay away from it as much as possible, however, becasue it will give you short term results, but in the long run you may lose more than you gain. You can tell people that their unit will not longer exist if they don't get with it, but the quality and type of planning that goes into those sorts of stressful approaches, as I say, have little long run merit. In any even, in this step you want a statement of purpose that is non-flowery, non-educationese, but rather one that is meaningful to the people that wrote it and communicates to those who are not familiar with their unit what is is they are trying to do. Again I emphasize, keep it simple and straightforward. It's very easy to wirte a two-page statement on why a program exists, very difficulty to write two lines.

Please note that is is essential to this process that the people doing the planning learn and behave in a manner that suggest they recognize it's their own personal plan. It is useful to them (by that I mean it rewards them with the resources and/or other things they require to operate their unit). If it turns out, as is often the case, that once a plan is produced it goes into the file then you have wasted their time and your own time. The planning unit must conclude, by themselves, with perhaps a little

gentle urging from you, that this planning process is a good idea.

Once you have some kind of purpose statement for each planning unit your next step is to ask them to develop five or six statements on what must be done by that office, program, or whatever, if they are to achieve the purpose. At LBCC we give these statements many labels such as outcomes, functions, and objectives. Right now people in Academic Affairs Programs tend to refer to them as outcomes, while the people in Support Services tend to call them functions. Those of you who are familiar with the literature might coall them product and process objectives. But whatever you call them they represent your third step, statements that describe how the purpose of the planning unit will be achieved.

Incidently, don't concern yourself with making these statements measurable as they are first written. It simply confuses the planning and more importantly raises the paranoia level. The people preparing the plans will eventually decide they are or are not precise enough to be evaluated. In effect, they like all other parts of the process will undergo periodic change.

The fourth step is a little more complex in that it takes different forms according to the nature of the planning unit. In addition, the reason for the step is quite different for one plannig unit as opposed to another unit. In any event, once you have the outcomes/functions for achieveing the purpose of each planning unit you should ask all units that are teaching-oriented to list each course offered by the group under one, only, of the several outcomes. They will claim this cannot be done and it's immoral, sexist, racist, bad taste, or whatever, Again, just suggest they try it, but if it's too tough we will simply skill the step and go on. The reasoning here it that this listing of courses will simply cause them to rethink and, perhaps rewrite in a more precise manner the outcomes and the purpose. It can produce several other results that are useful and nice to have, but they are not central to the system.

For those units that are non-teaching the fourth step is to ask them to list the tasks one must carry out to achieve each function and place these tasks in priority order. This will cause three things to happen. (A) They may decide to rewrite the functions to make them more specific. (B) They will provide a basis for a self-evaluation of each unit. (C) They give a basis for the people in the unit to decide where cuts, if needed, should be made or why they can't be made without impairing the mission of the college.

Here perhaps we should again recognize the importance of a dictate. The people in the unit must prepare the plan. It has no utility unless that is the case. If some administrator proposes it and sends it to you he has just wasted his time and your time. You can't expect commitment to the plan unless it is prepared by those who must implement it.

The fifth step is to ask each unit to prepare plans on how they will evaluate the degree to which the function or outcomes are

being achieved. They should explain how they will assess the results desired. Again this may cause the outcomes/functions to be refined further, since its very difficult to assess something if you have not clearly stated what it is you are trying to accomplish. Incidently, for those groups who have developed tasks they may prefer evaluating the tasks rather than the functions.

Step 6 is to begin collecting data. It would be nice if the desired outcomes could be measured in objective terms. For many people, however, this will be quite difficult and they will require considerable assistance. It would be nice if you had a good researcher and staff to help them, but for many colleges that won't be the case. It may sound like heresy coming from a former Director of Research, but the lack of measurability will not have a deadening effect. You might remember that getting people to start evaluating what they are doing is just as important, if not more so, than the quality of the evaluation. The importance of evaluating and being commiteed to it is more important than worrying about how objective the results are. Besides, the total process never ends and they will have plenty of time and opportunity to sharpen their evaluation methodology.

Based on the results of this evaluation the next step for each unit will be to decide how the resources they have should be re-organized, modified or changed to help them better achieve the desired results. In effect, they are now in a position to suggest alternatives, change direction depending on the magnitude of change required or desired.

The unit's next step is to start all over again--it must be understood that it is a never ending process--planning for change, uncertainty and ambiguity is a constant process of stating what you are trying to accomplish, assessing the degree you are sucessful, reorganizing your resources, reassessing your direction, evaluating the results.

There are many other things you will eventually want to consider in planning for change, and, in fact, you may have a number of them operational at your college. These include a comprehensive management training component, access to information (popularly called MIS, but it doesn't have to approach that ideal), efficiency criteria, position descriptions that are useful, certain components of zero base budgeting or similar systems, useful college policies, regulations and procedures just to name a few.

As I said in the beginning, however, it's easier to talk about a system for dealing with continuing change than it is to do it. My suggestion is that you get started now--it's a matter of survival.

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